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Descriptive Analysis of Bernie Sanders Announcement Speech

Christina Culotta

Bernie Sanders gave his presidential announcement speech for the Democratic primary election on May 26th, 2015, in Vermont. Throughout his speech, Sanders positions himself as the strongest candidate on the issue of climate change by framing it as critical, a responsibility, and the logical thing to do. To gain support for this, Sanders constructs his character as a family man and incites the emotions of urgency and a need to protect one's family¹.

Sanders sets the agenda on climate change and focuses on how this is an important issue in the upcoming election. He explains, "Climate change is real. It is caused by human activity and it is already causing devastating problems in the United States" (Sanders, 2015). He continues to discuss the detrimental effects on the world if we do not address this problem. He states,

Scientists are telling us that if we do not boldly transform our energy system away from fossil fuels and into energy efficiency and sustainable energies, this planet could be five to ten degrees warmer by the end of this century.... [and] will mean more drought, more famine, more rising sea level, more floods, more ocean acidification, more extreme weather disturbances, more disease and more human suffering. (Sanders, 2015)

This further sets the agenda on climate change because it demonstrates the urgency of addressing this topic.

¹ This essay applies Medhurst's (2005) conceptual overview of presidential campaign rhetoric – agenda-setting, framing, character construction, and emotional resonance

Sanders frames fixing climate change as being the only logical approach because he states a simple solution to prevent a multitude of extreme problems. This is a deductive structure because he immediately gives his thesis and then adds evidence and details to support it. Although he does not give specific statistics, he still uses logos. He lists nine problems that the world will face if we do not address this problem: “more drought, more famine, more rising sea level, more floods, more ocean acidification, more extreme weather disturbances, more disease and more human suffering” (Sanders, 2015). This makes the audience realize how bad it will be if we do not find a solution to climate change. He does not discuss how much money, time, or research will go into finding alternative energy sources, but instead makes it seem relatively simple. The only solution he explicitly states is that we have to “transform our energy system away from fossil fuels and into energy efficiency and sustainable energies” (Sanders, 2015). By making the solution sound so simple in contrast with the detrimental negative effects if we do nothing, it makes his approach seem like the logical thing to do.

Sanders frames this issue as one of the most important “responsibilities” that the American people have. He explains, “There is nothing more important than leaving this planet in a way that is habitable for our kids and grandchildren” (Sanders, 2015). By doing this, he shows that fixing the issue of climate change isn’t only something important for citizens to do, but he instills that it is an innate requirement within us. He also gives a reason for why it is so important: future generations. It’s easy to want to put climate change on the back burner because there aren’t immediate negative or positive effects by confronting it or ignoring it. He reminds the audience that even if they are not

instantaneously affected by climate change, they children will be. This gives the audience a reason to care about the issue.

Sanders construct himself as a family man and caring grandfather that wants to fix climate change for the safety of future generations. This gives him credibility because his concern appears genuine. Even from the very beginning of the speech, he starts by thanking his family and showing what a large family he is part of. He thanks his “wife Jane, [his] brother Larry, [his] children Levi, Heather, Carina and Dave for their love and support, and [his] seven beautiful grandchildren – Sonny, Cole, Ryleigh, Grayson, Ella, Tess and Dylan” (Sanders, 2015). This makes him seem more relatable and human and also puts his concern for the climate into perspective. Even before he addresses the topic of climate change, he begins talking about wanting to ensure a better future. He says,

Now is the time for millions of working families to come together to revitalize American democracy, to end the collapse of the American middle class, and to make certain that our children and our grandchildren are able to enjoy a quality of life that brings them health, prosperity, security and joy. (Sanders, 2015)

Later in the speech when he talks about wanting to protect the climate for “our children and our children’s children”, he is depicted as the best candidate for the issue at hand because he has a personal connection to it and it is something he holds dear to heart. He stresses how climate change can and will ruin the lives of future children, which creates the desire to save one’s kin.

Sanders uses emotional resonance to create a sense of urgency and the need to protect one’s children and family. He insists that climate change is an imperative issue

that needs to be addresses as soon as possible by using words and phrases such as “nothing more important” and “devastating” (Sanders, 2015). Likewise, he shows that climate change is a very big problem by saying things such as “boldly transform”. This makes the audience feel like they need to act to fix this problem as soon as possible. Sanders also uses emotional resonance by targeting people’s visceral desire to care for their children. People may not always care about themselves, but generally speaking they want to ensure safety and comfort for their children. When Sanders describes the risks of not taking care of the planet, he uses very extreme examples such as, “more drought, more famine, more rising sea level, more floods, more ocean acidification, more extreme weather disturbances, more disease and more human suffering” (Sanders, 2015). He previously mentioned the need to address climate change for future generations. This makes both of those ideas present in the audience’s minds. This idea resonates with people, especially parents in the audience.

In Bernie Sanders presidential candidacy announcement speech, he uses several tools to persuade the audience. He sets the agenda on climate change. From there, he frames it as an important issue that needs to be addressed and fixed as soon as possible, or else the world will face disturbing consequences, specifically in future generations. He characterizes himself as a family man who is looking out for his children and America. This makes him genuine and trustworthy. Lastly, he uses emotional resonance throughout the speech by creating an atmosphere that makes the audience want to help and act as soon as possible for the safety and protection of their families and future children.

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